

Louise Welker has been selected as the 2015 Graham/Greenlee First Things First Champion for Young Children.

The award is given to local champions who actively volunteer their time to raise public awareness of the importance of early childhood development and health. Champions spend a significant amount of time volunteering and building public awareness about the importance of early childhood issues.

The awareness-raising efforts Welker demonstrated include:

- Attended FTF Basic and Early Childhood Everyday training, focusing on early childhood messaging.
- Distributed Helpline magnets and taught families how to access this service.
- Assisted families in registering children for Imagination Library.
- Referred families to other FTF funded community services.
- Attended The Write Way training, focused on capturing early childhood success stories.
- Published a story of a teen mom receiving support from a Quality First program.
- Hosted an information table at a Community Baby Shower.
- Provided a presentation of FTF services to the Graham-Greenlee Early Childhood Coalition.



We recently caught up with Welker, whose recent retirement from Healthy Families where she worked with children birth to 5 and their families in home-based programs has given her the time to devote to early care and education as a First Things First Champion.

**Question: Why do you feel early childhood development and health is so important?**

**Answer:** It is so critical and vital that all children have the opportunity to grow their brain to its full potential. We know that 90 percent of a child's brain develops by the time they are five years old. It is the experiences that the child has on a regular basis that stimulates the brain to develop to its potential.

**Q: What caused you to get involved in efforts to increase public awareness of early childhood issues?**

**A:** I have always loved working with babies and children. I was a Family Support Specialist with Healthy Families for ten years. During this time, I went into the homes of prenatal moms and mothers with babies 0-5 years old. Our curriculum educated families in basic care, attachment and bonding, social emotional development, physical and brain development, security, trust, and many other topics. I was involved with many families throughout the years, and helping them succeed was very rewarding. I know that school success starts from the very beginning of a child's life. I am passionate about giving every baby the best start in life—making every child feel loved, valued, confident, and ready to succeed in life. If we focus on building strong families, this will, in turn, build strong communities.

**Q: Why do you feel building awareness in early childhood and developmental health is so important for families and communities?**

**A:** Every child deserves to have the best early start in life. With FTF, parents and caregivers are educated on ways to make their children healthy, happy and ready to succeed in school and therefore in life. I understand that our children are the future of our community and the stronger and more stable

they are in terms of education and development, the more successful we will be as a whole in growing and progressing. Raising children must be a collaborative effort, and the more we combine our community resources, the more successful we can be in raising the future generation of our community.

**Q: How have you seen awareness for the early years change in your community?**

**A:** The word is spreading fast in our community through coalitions, health fairs, word of mouth, media, Facebook, radio, billboards, the library, and the newspaper. Rack cards have been placed in health clinics, at the health department, at WIC, and other places. For the past two years, FTF has had huge success with the Community Baby Shower— reaching, talking, and educating approximately 200 expecting mothers. The hospital staff gives the FTF Parent Kit to every mom that delivers a baby in the Mt. Graham Hospital. Through these diverse avenues, the community is becoming more aware of the importance of early childhood development.

**Q: How do you suggest other people in your community get involved?**

**A:** I believe that FTF Outreach Coordinator, Paulette LeBlanc is doing an excellent job at recruiting community members into getting involved with spreading the word on early childhood development, however it will take a collaborative effort to reach the entire community. Paulette recently hosted an Early Childhood Coalition which was sponsored by the Graham and Greenlee County School Superintendents and JoAnn Morales, an Early Childhood instructor at Eastern Arizona College. All teachers from both counties were invited and encouraged to attend. The teachers were informed about all the good things that were happening with FTF. Paulette challenged each person present to give out a Birth to 5 magnet, and to give someone an application to start receiving free books through the Imagination Library program available through FTF. By encouraging these community members to relay this information to other audiences, we can see a ripple effect throughout the community. I believe this coalition will make great strides toward spreading the word and getting the community involved. I also believe that we can reach the young generation through Facebook and the FTF website, and of course, word of mouth.

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**About First Things First** – First Things First is a voter-created, statewide organization that funds early education and health programs to help kids be successful once they enter kindergarten. Decisions about how those funds are spent are made by local councils staffed by community volunteers. To learn more, visit [azftf.gov](http://azftf.gov).